# AMERICAN AIRLINES CREW TALKS ABOUT ONCE IN A LIFETIME FLIGHT WITH POPE FRANCIS

**News / Airlines**

It was an airplane flight that changed Jeff Gross's life.

The 47-year-old flight attendant was one of several dozen **American Airlines** employees chosen to work on the chartered airplane that ferried **Pope Francis** around the United States -- and back to Rome -- late last month.

"When he walked through the cabin, it was like seeing God," said Gross, of Euless, who helped staff the main cabin on the pope's flights during his whirlwind trip to the United States.

At one point toward the end of the trip, as the Boeing 777-200 they were on was headed to Rome, Pope Francis invited all of the crew members to line up and meet him.

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Gross, who was second in line, said he was a little nervous and offered up a prayer before his turn.

When he found himself face to face with the pope, he asked for his blessing and protection.

"He blessed me (and) held my hand," said Gross, who is not Catholic but asked the pope to bless crosses and rosary beads he carried. "It was a spiritual experience.

"Truly, it was like looking in the eyes of God."

Since returning home, Gross said he has been filled with such joy and contentment.

"Although I was doing my job, it almost felt like we were (taking) a sacred journey," he said. "It was the most incredible life-changing experience ever. It was the highlight of my career."

Gross was among the American Airlines employees -- pilots, flight attendants, security officials, technicians and more -- who were hand-picked from the Fort Worth-based company's nationwide employee base to work on this flight. They were all vetted by the U.S. Secret Service.

On the plane chartered by the U.S. Conference of Bishops, they took the pope from the Joint Base Andrews in Maryland to John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York then to Philadelphia and finally to Rome.

The Boeing 777-200 chartered for the pope is already back in service, officials say.

'A very powerful feeling'

Captain George Griffin, a 53-year-old pilot from Flower Mound, was the lead captain on the trip.

He said he personally greeted Pope Francis -- whose busy trip included meeting President Barack Obama, speaking to Congress and the U.N., celebrating masses, feeding the homeless, meeting prison inmates and more -- every time he boarded the plane.

The two had a few opportunities to spend a few minutes together, which meant a lot to Griffin, who is Catholic.

At one point, Griffin presented a gift from American Airlines to the pope. But he can't disclose what the gift was.

As the plane was headed to Philadelphia, Griffin said he asked Pope Francis to bless his landing.

Pope Francis said he would, and in return he asked Griffin to pray for him so he would do well in Philadelphia.

Later in the trip, Griffin asked the pope to bless him and his family, as well as some crosses and rosaries he had with him.

Pope Francis obliged and Griffin said there really are no words to describe the experience.

"When you are in the presence of the pope, ... it's a very powerful feeling," he said. "I felt very blessed."

Shepherd One

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Tom Howard is among those who helped plan the trip.

The North Richland Hills man said work on setting up the flight began back in January after American Airlines was the airline chosen for the journey.

Arrangements included picking an aircraft, flight crews, maintenance crews and more -- and making sure everything and everyone received federal clearance to be on the flight.

"Pope Francis didn't want any type of special services," said Howard, 59, an Integrated Operations Center dispatch tech specialist who was among those on the flight. "He wanted everyone on the plane to have the same services."

American Airlines last transported a pope in 1993, when the airline flew John Paul II to Rome from Denver.

But everything took time.

Just getting approval for the plane to be called "Shepherd One" -- the traditional call sign given to an aircraft carrying the pope -- took months and created mountains of paperwork.

Only a few temporary alterations were made to the plane for the trip.

Vatican City flags and the papal seal were added to the aircraft to formally make it the "papal" airplane. And some curtains taken off a different plane were added to the first class area where the pope sat.

"The Holy Father didn't want any modifications to the plane that would cost extra money," Howard said.

Howard said at one point, he did ask Pope Francis to bless the plane and he obliged.

"I couldn't hear what he was saying, ... but he did the sign of the cross."

Blessed be

Howard, who is Catholic and has nine brothers and sisters, brought a bag of items -- including rosaries, crosses and books -- that he asked the pope to bless.

The pope agreed to bless the bag and the items in it.

"'But now you have to do one thing for me,'" Howard recalled the pope saying to him. "'Pray for me.'"

That moment, and the whole trip, Howard said, was inspiring and nearly overwhelming.

"It's indescribable," he said.

Now Howard said he is focusing on his next assignment: Booking charter flights for the Texas Rangers baseball team to take to their playoff games.

Unfortunately, he said he can't book the team on the already-blessed Boeing 777-200 that was used to fly the pope.

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That plane is bigger than what the Texas Rangers need -- and it's already back in service (with the papal seal and flags removed) -- as a regular passenger plane.

But Howard said he hopes the plane he will pick for the Rangers will bring them luck nonetheless.

"Hopefully, we will be bringing them back ... with the trophy."

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